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DE RUEHSI #1962/01 3031449

ZNY CCCCC ZZH

P 301449Z OCT 09

FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2379

INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/OSD WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 001962

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/30/2019

TAGS: PGOV PREL RU GG

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: COUNTERING RUSSIAN CLAIMS OF TERRORISTS IN THE PANKISI GORGE

Classified By: Ambassador John R. Bass for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: A visit to Pankisi revealed no evidence of Russian claims of increased terrorist activity in the region.

Stopping in each village after reaching the gorge, CDM leader Giorgi Targamadze facilitated discussion among locals, police officials, and community leaders on the situation in the Pankisi, and the lack of an Islamic extremist presence. During a tour of the single Wahhabi mosque, residents in the gorge unanimously commented that the gorge was thoroughly devoid of militants, the border was virtually impossible to cross, and the only important issue in the area was unemployment. Georgian law enforcement stated that in comparison to 2001-2003, the calm security situation had allowed for a reduction of forces in the area, and their primary focus was on petty crime. The assembled diplomatic corps, along with an at least equal number of press, left with the impression that the Russian accusations were meritless. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Comment: With nearly every embassy in Tbilisi sending a representative, and large numbers of press from both inside and outside of Georgia, the mission was clearly a success for the CDM party, while also providing an important opportunity to publicly demonstrate Georgia's interest in transparency in a region supposedly a haven for terrorists. The impromptu nature of the travel, and the ability of diplomats and press to talk privately with residents in the area, further contributed to the positive nature of the visit. By the end, the Swedish representative openly toasted Targamadze for the trip, saying it was clear that the next time he came, he would be sure to bring his family given how secure it was. While it is certainly not the last word on the issue, and Georgian government officials expect continued statements from Moscow, this initial attempt to push back on the issue, employing the international community and media as its outlet, will likely be looked upon as a successful strategy in the future. End Comment.

GEORGIAN CONCERN

¶3. (SBU) Seeking to counter Russian claims of a terrorist safehaven in the Pankisi Gorge of northern Georgia, the Christian-Democratic Party (CDM) organized a tour of the gorge on 29 October. Recent items in Russian press in October regarding the possibility of terrorist activity in the Pankisi Gorge, and the Russian belief that Chechen terrorists were using the gorge as a safehaven have drawn significant attention in Georgian media, government and academic circles. In particular, FSB Chief Alexander Bortnikov's reported statements received wide attention when he accused Georgian security services with assisting "Al-Qa'ida emissaries." In response, comments ranging from denouncements of the statements as Russian propaganda to concern about so-called "Wahhabism" in the Pankisi have

flourished in local media. Of note, opposition leadership, including CDM party leader and MP Giorgi Targamadze and Alliance for Georgia leader Irakli Alasania, appear to have taken the lead in countering the Russian claims, with Alasania calling on the government to organize a trip of diplomats and journalists to the Pankisi, and Targamadze doing just that.

¶4. (C) With Georgian admissions in 2002 that the Pankisi was a safehaven for militants, the idea to counter claims now, with Georgia/Russian relations near their nadir, now, with Georgia/Russian relations near their nadir, achieved wide support across the political spectrum. While Georgian government officials publicly state their lack of concern about the "groundless accusations," privately they note significant worries that these types of statements could be used as pretexts for additional anti-Georgian diplomatic efforts at the UN. Alasania told us of his concerns that the Russian government could use old recordings or documents, possibly fraudulent or forged, as new "evidence" of Georgian complicity with Chechen militants. These concerns resulted directly in the apparently unanimous support for a fact finding trip to the Pankisi gorge with diplomats and journalists.

OBSERVATIONS AND SECURITY

¶5. (C) Attended by over 20 foreign diplomats, including the Ambassadors of Iran and China, as well as at least 30 members of the press, Targamadze led a convoy of approximately 15 vehicles and one large tour bus into the Pankisi gorge.

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Prior to departure he made sure to conduct multiple media interviews and appeared quite pleased with the turnout. Stopping at the first large Pankisi village of Duisi, Targamadze immediately gathered a crowd of villagers and began asking questions about the security situation in the Pankisi, and the villagers' thoughts on Russian comments about Al-Qa'ida support. Of particular note was that while it was clear, at least in the first village, that locals knew the delegation was coming, Targamadze generally picked random people from the street to ask questions, and encouraged the diplomatic corps to talk with villagers on their own as well.

¶6. (C) In discussions with PolOff, locals made it clear that they had significant concerns regarding the Russian comments, worrying about everything from Russian provocations at the border to a Russian military excursion in the area. In a common trend, each villager noted the near impossibility of crossing the border (some noted this with a hint of disappointment, as it had obviously hurt the illicit economy in the area), with Georgian border guards being exceedingly strict, and Russian border troops not preventing the crossing of any would-be travelers from the Pankisi area. Additionally, they stressed that from November to March, the small road, inaccessible to vehicles even during the summer, was also nearly impossible to cross via horse or on foot. Villagers also made it clear that the situation had greatly changed from 2002, when shopping for grenades and Kalashnikovs was as easy as going to the market. They tended to credit the Saakashvili government for these changes, but also stressed that unemployment was a primary concern of residents, with some estimating that unemployment bordered on 90 percent. Residents in each village also made clear to the assembled diplomats that, of the approximately 800 Chechen refugees in the Pankisi, most had assimilated completely into the Georgian and Kist communities, with intermarriage, joint schooling (in Georgian), and joint worship at churches or mosques.

¶7. (C) As the road show continued, Targamadze's decisions on when to make random stops at different points appeared to be solely based on when he saw villagers lingering on the

streets. Beyond the first village, it clearly was a surprise for locals to see such a massive convoy. However, statements and criticisms remained the same: the peace in the area was better than it had been in at least ten years, and no fighters had passed through in recent memory, nor would they likely be able to without notice. Villagers seemed genuinely surprised that there were reports of such travel, as most Chechen refugees had given up even attempting to contact relatives in Russia due to the extreme difficulty in actually traversing the border, by legal or illegal means. The convoy stopped and toured the one Wahhabi mosque in the gorge, a clearly well-built structure from 2001 (reportedly from Saudi funds) that dominated the village. The Imam provided answers to questions, stating that there were approximately 7,000 Muslims in the gorge; 90 percent Georgian, five percent Kist, and the remainder refugees from Russia. Of these, approximately 150 Muslims prayed at his mosque, with the majority being young men. There were three other mosques in the Pankisi gorge; however, these followed a less stringent version of Islam, and were clearly more Qless stringent version of Islam, and were clearly more popular and traditional among the locals. The Imam, in response to a diplomat's question, stressed that the local government had submitted a special order to not hinder any activities of the mosque, which was much appreciated.

18. (C) In a private discussion, CDM MP Nika Laliashvili, a former Ministry of State Security Colonel who worked extensively in the Pankisi gorge in 2001-2002, emphasized the changes since his time in MSS. He said that while he travels frequently to the area, it still shocked him to view firsthand the changes from the days of Al-Qa'ida influence. Of particular interest to him was the lack of visible weaponry (PolOff never saw any during this trip), whereas in 2002 one could buy heroin, grenades and RPGs as simply as fruit at the local market. Stressing that he certainly was not a strong supporter of Saakashvili, he said the changes in this area clearly were a victory for the government. When asked about current security service activity in the Pankisi area, he noted that all Georgian special forces and other MOIA counterterrorism units had departed the area, and only minimal MOIA liaison from these units with the local MOIA police was necessary. The most troubling current issues of importance to the local police is marijuana usage by local male youths; certainly not the hard drugs or weapons smuggling that were so prevalent when he served in the area.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

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19. (C) Ending the fact-finding mission approximately eight kilometers from the border on an empty river basin, Targamadze led a dinner in which he continued to stress the importance of democracy and openness in Georgia, replete with toasts expressing appreciation to the villagers for their hospitality, and the diplomats for their interest. Targamadze worked the crowds of villagers as a seasoned politician, and the Georgians with whom he interacted all seemed to appreciate it. Targamadze's ability to build support among the villagers, and his clear comfort in doing so, was noted by most diplomats as impressive, and a method of politicking usually only attributed to Saakashvili among the leading political figures. Additionally, the fact that CDM organized this trip, with every Georgian press outlet stressing it as such, also demonstrated the party's efforts to build a base of support among the international community, and to be looked upon by Georgians as a serious player on one issue that generally unifies the populace: Russia.

BASS